

uttered chaos

*AN INTERVIEW WITH JOY L. MCDOWELL
11/11/11*

UC: Who are you?

JM: I'm a small town country girl with a big universe view. I remember the words of Frank Herbert, the author of *Dune*, who said, "I don't want to set the world on fire. I just want to make the grass wave as I go by." That sentiment always suited my desire to stir the wind a bit without launching an inferno.

UC: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

JM: I'm a self-taught writer who records the dignity of the characters I meet. I've been writing since I could hold a fat pencil.

UC: What do you do when you are not writing?

JM: I hike, travel, sketch and volunteer for the Justice Department reviewing foster care and adoption files. I also learn new ideas from my three grandsons.

UC: What is your writing process?

JM: I try to write every day, usually early in the day and edit mentally in the afternoon as I hike the mountain I live on.

UC: Do you follow a regular routine?

JM: Yes, because if I miss my outdoor exercise or writing time I'm grumpy.

UC: What are the most important elements of good writing?

JM: I believe my readers should be able to follow the action. If I'm writing a piece with a more surreal flavor I hope my readers feel empowered to drink in the images and puzzle over new sensations

UC: According to you, what tools are must-haves for writers?

JM: A good word processor, a contemplative space and the innate courage to tell your truth without apology.

UC: What motivates you to write?

JM: The volcano inside my head, which is truly a force of nature. I cannot "not" write.

UC: Do you ever suffer from writer's block? If so, what do you do about it?

JM: I rarely suffer from writer's block, but I'm not always where I want to be, so I need to move forward and persist. It helps if I spend time in museums, galleries and at literary and art events. Often I overhear the opening line of a piece I will write in public or as I travel. For example, I once heard people behind a store display. A woman's voice said, "Why did you bail my mother out of jail?" The unseen persons moved on and I had to imagine the rest of the story.

UC: Do you have any advice for other writers?

JM: Believe in yourself because it's no one else's job to do that. Commit a double homicide. Kill doubt and strangle procrastination. Then write about the bodies.

UC: What is the message in your book?

JM: Respect those who labor to build life, sustain themselves and survive whatever hand is dealt to them by fate.

UC: What are your readers' reactions to it?

JM: I believe most of my readers can identify with the characters that I write about in my stories. Some cry, others laugh, but most of all I hope they care.

UC: Did you learn anything from writing your book and what was it?

JM: To listen to the persistent and often engaging voices of my fellow passengers on this ship of life. If I shut up and listen, the stories present themselves. When I'm alone I step outside and listen to chickadees or owls or travel to the mountains to fit my palm into the track of a wolf.

UC: What are your current / future projects?

JM: I would like to experiment with form and write a few nature poems. But the tragedy and triumph of daily life feeds me stories I must record. I'm always fascinated by edges and sharp elbows; where the land meets the sea, where life unfolds into death, where war finds peace.

UC: What book(s) / author(s) have influenced your life and writing?

JM: I enjoy reading TC Boyle, John Steinbeck and the words of Stephen Dunn and Yusef Komunyakaa.

UC: Tell me about the cover and/or title?

JM: The cover photo and back flap photo on my chapbook, *Diesel Horse*, were taken by my good friend Dawn McIntyre, who is a wonderful photographer and fabric artist living in New Mexico. The old truck on the cover was photographed in a field north of Taos, New Mexico. I love the color and rust. Although the truck is most likely not a diesel, the diesel in the title came from the fuel used by loggers and fishermen to conduct their work. Their machines and vehicles are the horses of our day.

UC: Do you have anything specific that you want to say to your readers?

JM: Thank you for noticing my words. Tell me your stories and outrageous lies. They should flow like liquid gold from your wet tongue.

UC: If you were in an anthology please talk about how you perceive your work(s) fit into the theme.

JM: Four of my poems were included in the anthology, *New Poets of the American West*. I was awarded the editor's choice award for Oregon Poets. I believe my work fit well with the other independent and strong voices rising from a still challenging environment.